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Leave Creation to the Creator: The Corrupt Creator in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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Abstract:

My paper discusses the impact that Mary Shelley's theistic views and the science of her time had on the writing of *Frankenstein*. Her Christian ideals helped her to shape the character of Victor and play out the consequences of his actions. She discusses many questions about the human soul and the afterlife in her novel. Using writings from her diary, it is clear that Shelley was a very dedicated Christian and believed absolutely in the presence of an eternal soul. A large theme in the story is the question of whether or not the Creature has a soul and, if so, where he received it from. Shelley was also very interested in the science of her time and her story is full of examples of the most up to date technology such as the interest in electricity. Shelley took the interest in electricity and took it to its furthest reaches by using it to reanimate a corpse in her story. She also discusses the current debate on whether or not science should medal so intricately with human life. Shelley makes many comparisons between the Christian God and Victor Frankenstein by contrasting how they handle their situations and the love they feel for their creations. Victor is appalled by his Creature and leaves it to fend for itself. *Frankenstein* contains an incredible mix of theistic principles and scientific questions both of which Shelley was very passionate about.

Mary Shelley was a woman ahead of her time in more ways than one. She wrote her famous story *Frankenstein*, which still resonates with audiences today. She approached weighty topics in the scientific community, such as the moral issues with reanimating corpses, with an imaginative, suggestive, and sometimes playful manner that many men of her time didn't have (Holmes 184). She was also very firmly rooted in her Christian faith, despite pressures from her husband and friends who were very radical in their unchristian beliefs and ideas. Although *Frankenstein* is typically viewed as just a horror story, it is very much a cautionary tale. Mary Shelley's personal theistic views and knowledge of the science of her time help contrast Victor Frankenstein's scientific 'monster' with the Genesis account of creation.

As David Hogsette notes, Shelley's theistic views were developed as a young girl and helped guide her through every aspect of her life:

According to Mary Shelley, God is 'a beneficent and gentle Power,' a necessary creative Being who is the cause of earthly and heavenly existence and, as such, whose creative power is vastly different than that of humans who are themselves God's creation. (534)

Her father, William Godwin, had very strong opinions and views on Christianity that he shared with his daughter and she held on to them and let them shape her opinions for the rest of her life. She was greatly influenced by her father, who was in turn influenced by colleagues Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Humphry Davy (Hogsette 535). Her first ideas for her novel can be dated back to when she attended Humphry's lecture on chemistry with her father when she was just fourteen. Between the writing of her novel and her inspiration, she continued to seek out scientific learning and theistic understanding. She had a very sound belief in God, but what was

most evident in this was her view of an afterlife. She was very vocal in journal entries and writings about her confidence of what was waiting for her after death. In one journal entry she writes, "...as I grow older I grow more fearless for myself-I become firmer in my opinions" and "I trust in a hereafter-I have ever done so. I know it shall be mine-even with thee, glorious spirit! Who surely lookest on, pitiest, and lovest thy Mary" (Jones 186, 206). Her belief in an afterlife comforted and kept calm her throughout many of the tragic losses she faced in her life, including the deaths of several children and her husband. She even believed that she would see her husband in her afterlife, even though he was a devout atheist.

Shelley held very firmly to her faith even in the face of atheistic views of her husband and friends. When it came to ethics, she and her husband disagreed strongly, as Shelley believed in upholding scientific ethics (Hogsette 540). One of Percy Shelley's best friends was Lord Byron, who had similar opinions and beliefs as P. Shelley. Byron and Percy often felt that moral obligations were keeping many important scientific advances from being made. On several occasions they sat and discussed scientific and moral subjects in depth. Both P. Shelley and Byron advocated the materialism based on the strictly physical evolution of the brain presented in the Lawrence lectures (Holmes 188). Although Shelley was there for these discussions, she was a 'nearly silent' dissenter who was not persuaded from her theistic views (Hogsette 541). Shelley was able to hold firm to her beliefs in Christian morals and ethics even though she was surrounded by philosophical discussions that were set against what she believed. She was a very strong and independent woman who was willing to even go against the beliefs of her beloved husband.

Frankenstein was published in January of 1818, around the same time that Karl August Weinhold, who had just conducted a series of experiments on the nature of animal life, published

Experiments on Life and Its Primary Forces (Finger 161, 170). He inspired several tests that showed that by using electricity, one could stimulate the nervous systems of many animals and even the facial muscles on recently decapitated criminals. In *Experiments on Life and Its Primary Forces*, Weinhold states that bimetallic electricity could restore life to a dead body (Finger 164, 166). Weinhold performed many experiments on frogs, conveying electricity through their bodies and causing muscle twitches and natural movements (Finger 162). He also performed many unethical experiments on small kittens. He would decapitate a kitten, remove its spinal cord and replace it with zinc and silver. The metals in the kitten would soon cause the kitten's heart to start beating again and often times the kitten would hop and jump around. On other kittens, he would remove the cerebrum, cerebellum and spinal cord and replace them with zinc, silver, and mercury. This kitten reacted to loud noises and its pupils contracted in bright light. With these experiments, Weinhold held that it was possible to create physical life (Finger 168-69). Giovanni Aldini, another scientist, successfully stimulated the brains of cows, sheep, dogs, and horses (Finger 163). Mary Shelley kept herself very educated and aware of the scientific advances of her time and applied these to her writing. As Stanley Finger and Mark B. Law state, "electricity was on just about every scientist's mind in the opening decades of the nineteenth century" (Finger 164). This was right around the time Shelley was writing and developing her ideas for *Frankenstein*. She was very influenced by the idea of reanimation of a corpse by electricity, but also by her theistic views that life should be left in the hands of God.

Shelley begins her comparisons of the processes used to create life by having Victor strive to discover the secrets of life without thinking about what he will do with the created life form afterwards. Victor, who is narrating to Walton, states straightforwardly that he pursued the creation of life because the question of where the origin of life came from was one that plagued

his mind and he decided to apply himself to finding out. After he finds the answer, he feels he cannot stop because “my imagination was too much exalted by my first success to permit me to doubt of my ability” (Shelley 32-3). Before he decides to use the knowledge he has gained, he hesitates for a long time, debating whether or not to use. Finally, his pride and self-confidence take control of him, and he pursues something he later knows he should not have.

The views Victor has of creating life are disturbingly opposite of the accounts in the Genesis creation story. In Genesis, God creates man in His own image, whereas Victor decides to make his creation bigger but proportional to man because he would not be able to work on a regular human scale (Shelley 33). Victor is also driven by his pride and his desire to do what no one has done since creation, whereas, in Genesis, man is created for the purpose of ruling over the plants and the animals and worshiping God. Victor’s creation is born out of selfish ambition and perverted knowledge.

Another opposite to the Genesis creation is the symbolism in the way in which Victor goes about obtaining the knowledge to create life. In order to learn the secret to life, Victor surrounds himself with death “examining and analysing all the minutiae of causation, as exemplified in the change from life to death, and death to life” (Shelley 31). He spends many nights in cemeteries and mausoleums. He observes the natural decay of bodies and watches worms move into skulls. This directly contrasts the creation in Genesis. On the second day, God says “Let the land produce vegetation” and on the fifth day He says “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds” (Genesis 1:11, 1:24). God creates man by first covering the earth with life in the forms of plants and animals. Victor uses death to learn how to create life, but God fills the earth with an abundance of life before creating man. After He creates the oceans and land on the third day, he then creates fish and animals on the fifth and sixth days. He lives

with his creations, and continues to take care of everything and is always aware of the planet.

The differences here are symbolic; Victor must pursue and use death to create a life form that he shuns whereas God's methods and sources are purer and He loves to be with His creations.

Victor's workshop is dark and detached and sets the tone for how he will play his role of creator.

After Victor has created life, he is utterly repulsed by what he has done and flees as John Paul Riquelme notes "Frankenstein is repelled by the differences from himself and his expectations that he perceives in the creature he has created" (5). In Genesis, after God has created man, He sees that "it was very good" (1:31). On the other hand, when Victor's Creature comes to life, he says that "horror and disgust filled my heart" (Shelley 36). Victor spends two years constructing his creature, and Shelley seems to be implying that, no matter how long one spends perfecting a form to give life to, the results will not begin to come close to what God did in one day. It does not matter that Victor spends so much time on his creation because, when it comes down to it, all life that man tries to give to a corpse is a sick perversion of humankind. The names Victor uses to refer to his creature also contrast to the creation of man. He calls him "dæmon," monster, and wretch. The Creature, on the other hand, refers to Victor as "my natural lord and king" (Shelley 68). Often in the Bible, God refers to humans as his sons and daughters, and He himself is often referred to as Father. Though the Creature does refer to Victor as "father", Victor never refers to the Creature in any way but negatively.

Victor is seeking fame and glory for his creation, but, after he sees his monstrosity, his mental and physical health take a swift turn for the worst. He begins raving incessantly about his creation and is struck with a nervous fever for months. It seems his lack of energy and months long illness are reminiscent of God resting on the seventh day after He creates man. When he recovers and is able to go home, his family begins to notice the difference in him. After the

deaths of William and Justine, which he knows he is indirectly the cause of, he is no longer the happy, loving young man he once was. He is silent and melancholy and often goes off to spend time alone. The similarities stop there of course. In Genesis, God only rests for one day after creating all of the heavens, the earth, and every living thing whereas Victor is affected for life. The fact that Victor cannot cope emotionally and physically with what he has done is a symbolic comparison. It symbolizes strength in that God is strong enough to live with His creations and man is not. This seems to be Shelley's way of warning her readers that man will never be able to accomplish what God can do so easily. Victor even has to put the thoughts out of his mind so that he can function again. When he does think on it, he becomes depressed and isolates himself from others. What Victor does in two years doesn't even come close to what God does in one day.

Victor makes many errors while creating his 'monster' that contrast with the way God created man in the Bible. When Victor is approached by his creation, the Creature says to him, "God in pity made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of your's, more horrid from its very resemblance" (Shelley 91). Victor needs to "improve" upon the image of man to be able to work with his creation and essentially make a larger and more beautiful creature. Several times while he was creating, he notes how he had made sure his creature was beautiful with flowing, black hair and very white teeth. In comparison, God says, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). Along with the fact that God made man in his own image, He also created them with love. He made man to rule over the plants and animals of the earth, and He gave them a place with him in heaven when they die. Victor creates his monster because his ego drove him to do something no man had ever done before. He did originally love his creation, but once it came to life, Victor turned on it. He is

excited by the idea that his new species of man “would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (Shelley 33). He created so that he could be a god-like figure, being worshiped by his creation. He does not put any thought into what would happen to his creature after the creation, only focusing on perfecting the process and becoming a god to his creature. He did not create with any purpose besides just creating. In Jeremiah, it says, “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you’” (Jeremiah 29:11-12). God always listens to his children and does things for their own good. Victor, on the other hand, ends up rebuking the Creature when he approaches Victor asking for help. Even though Victor eventually agrees to help his Creature, he finds he cannot follow through with his actions and once again abandons his creation for his own selfish reasons that will not benefit the Creature.

Once Victor sees his Creature, he completely abandons it and all his duties as creator. When he is confronted on the mountain by his creation, it says to him, “...you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us” (Shelley 68). By creating life, Victor ties himself to the creation with a bond so strong, it will remain for the rest of their lives. He tries to sever this unbreakable bond by abandoning the Creature and pretending he can give up his responsibilities to it as Zinia Mitra notes: “Frankenstein shrinks away from all responsibility and emphasizes that he is irreproachable of all transgression expect [sic] for the act of creation” (Mitra 56). Victor will not take any responsibility for the Creature and his actions because he believes that, just by creating, it does not put the blame on him for anything else that comes from that. He does feel guilty at the death of his younger brother and Justine, wishing he hadn’t inadvertently killed them through the

Creature, but he still refuses to take his duties as creator seriously. After the Creature forces him to face his failings, he does momentarily decide to help his creation but he again abandons the Creature for selfish reasons. He does not protect his creation from any harm or misfortune. Instead, he tells the Creature that he wishes to kill it and remove it from the world. In 1 Timothy, Paul writes, “For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Timothy 4:4). This verse states that God does not make mistakes when he creates and he welcomes all his creations to Him. Victor obviously regrets his actions and he tries to keep his creation away from him and the rest of the world. The biggest difference in the way both creators treat their creations is love. God is seen as healer and provider (Verhey 360). In 1 John, the apostle John writes to all believers, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1). God showers us, His children, with love. In contrast, Victor says to his creature, “come on then, that I may extinguish the spark which I so negligently bestowed” (Shelley 68). Where God treats all his children with love, Victor threatens and belittles his creation, telling it that he wishes he could kill it. This moment only confirms the opinions the Creature had formed of Victor.

While wandering in the world, the Creature finds a copy of *Paradise Lost*, and it shapes his opinions of his role and Victor's. Victor, of course, plays the god-like role. At first reading, Creature identifies himself as the Adam of the situation saying, “Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence” (Shelley 90). The one difference he feels most acutely is the lack of an Eve counterpart for himself. He asks Victor to create for him, as is the creator's duty to do, a female companion to soothe his sorrows and share his thoughts (Shelley 91). At first, Victor consents because he is forced to face what he has done wrong and begins construction on a female, but he finds he cannot bear to do it and destroys his work before

it is done. He worries that either the female will not agree to the life of isolation that the Creature has promised they will live, or that the creatures will produce offspring that will endanger civilization. Creature, now forever alone, vows revenge on Victor, wanting him to be lonely like Creature himself is. This final straw pushes the Creature into the role of Satan, with whom he already partially identifies. He tells Victor “his [Adam’s] state was far different from mine in every other respect...Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition” (Shelley 90). The Creature then becomes the Satan to Victor’s God; he revolts and tries and succeeds to ruin everything Victor has in life. The only difference is that God did not give Satan any reason to revolt against Him. This further exploits the flaws Victor has as a creator. These likenesses give *Frankenstein* a feeling of deep theistic morals and present many ideas and concepts.

Shelley’s theistic views shaped her view of the afterlife and the soul, and she brings up both of these ideas in *Frankenstein*. Victor says during his pursuit of giving life that, “I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit” (Shelley 33). Shelley may have been indicating that in order to create life, one needs to bestow a soul upon the life form. Victor is only successful in creating life because he sacrificed his own soul to bring his creature to life. In her life, Shelley was very vocal about her belief in an eternal soul and her confidence in an afterlife. The fact that Victor becomes consumed with the destruction of his creation and his refusals to help the Creature for no other reason than his hatred of the being, point to the idea that he has become “soulless”. The Creature, on the other hand, is a benign and gentle being who despises war and violence. It would seem that Victor’s soul was transferred to the Creature. Before he attempts to create life, Victor is a loving, amiable young man, but, after the creation and the disasters it set in motion, everything in his life begins going wrong and he gradually

becomes depressed and distant. His entire being changes by the end of the novel. The Creature, meanwhile, is learning about life, beauty, and loves the cottagers he observes, even helping them with their chores at night. By giving all these small clues, Shelley presents the idea of a soul being the key to life and warns readers that giving anything, especially one's soul, will be detrimental.

At the end of the novel, when the Creature is giving his farewell speech to Walton, he makes a few references to what he believes will happen after death. He says, "where can I find rest but in death?" (Shelley 161). This alludes to the book of Jeremiah which says, "you will find rest for your souls" (Jeremiah 6:16). When talking to the corpse of Victor, the Creature wonders if maybe Victor can still hear him and think (Shelley 161). Essentially, he is wondering if Victor has passed on to the afterlife and is watching events. Finally, the Creature exposes his method of death to Walton saying that he "shall ascend [his] funeral pile triumphantly" (Shelley 161). He will triumph over death because he possesses Victor's immortal soul and will ascend to heaven. This means that the unfortunate Victor does not own his soul anymore, and, therefore, no pleasant afterlife awaits him after his death. By going against nature and many ethical standards, Victor does make a remarkable discovery, but one that comes with the ultimate price of his eternal soul. He loses his soul to his creation, who identifies with Satan, giving an interesting take on the idea of selling one's soul to the Devil. When it comes down to it, the Creature dies knowing something better awaits him, but Victor does not have a soul to ascend anywhere.

At the first reading, *Frankenstein* seems to be a cautionary horror tale, but, after several readings, Mary Shelley's views and beliefs can be found permeating the entire novel. The theistic morals and understandings she was raised with greatly influenced her writings. She fills her novel with rich comparisons and tells an in-depth cautionary tale. The comparisons between

Victor Frankenstein and the God of the Bible set up her main warning not to tamper with creation. By using a god-like figure who goes wrong and a “monstrous” Creature who is not so terrible at all but who is forced into a terrible situation, Shelley warns her audience that trying to become god-like will end in disaster. The morals in the story still resonate with audiences today. David Hogsette says that Shelley’s work is “still teaching us something about ourselves and the contemporary world in which we live... the persistence of *Frankenstein* is somewhat disquieting, since it ultimately means that we have heard her message but have not fully heeded its prescient and relevant warnings (532). Shelley uses a unique mix of modern science and biblical references that blend together to produce a work that attracts readers of all beliefs and ideas.

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